Alice Royce, Girl Detective

The BLUE RIDGE MYSTERY

An Episode of Christmas

No. 5 in the Series of a Clever Young Girl's Extraordinary Experiences.

BY CHARLES SOMERVILLE.



The lamplight flung its rays on the face of Fred Hampton

I.

IN the mail of Alice Royce there came one morning in December, 19——, a curious letter, crude in expression, ungrammatical, yet touching the heart of the girl detective to a quick response. Save for the injection of punctuation and capitalization, the letter is herewith directly reproduced:

Ramsay, Tenn., Dec. 12, 19——.

Dear Miss Royce: Bein' as how we all down thisaway knowed how you was the one that ketched the counterfitters here last year, and admiring you for a wonderful smart young lady, I am sending you on my bended knees this letter for you, please, for God's sake to help me. Miss Royce, my husband has been put away in jail for all his life for a killin' of Ralston Pendleton, which he never done—never, Miss Royce. I reckon as how everybody most but me thinks he done it—him bein' found the way he was. But the day they took him away he swore to me, like he swore all along that he was innocent. Miss Royce, we were only married just a litabit a while, and Miss Royce I don't want that my baby when its born shall have its daddy a murderer to everybody's mind. Allen's innocent, Miss Royce. He didn't do no lyin' to me. He was found right beside the man they all said he killed; but he didn't. The quarrel they had was done finished and over long ago.

Miss Royce, my pap done lent me $15 to send to have you come down here, and after that I'll sell the ring that Allen gave me for our engagement that cost $20. I'm only a poor mountain girl, but I thought if you could help me in this awful trouble you all would do it anyway. All the time after I've sent the letter away, I'll be prayin' you'll come and help me. Please, Miss Royce, think of me thataway and come right away. Yours respectfully,

LAURA ROSE BULLEN.

Far different in appearance than her crudely written letter was Mrs. Laura Bullen, the young mountain wife, whom Alice Royce saw for the first time when she alighted at Crandall, Ramsay being four miles away, off the railroads and in the heart of beautiful, if melancholy, Blue Ridge Mountains. She was a slender, flaxen-haired girl, sweet-mouthed and with an expression of suffering in her great childish blue eyes that was tenderly piteous. Her father, lean-featured, gaunt and shabby, but with a fine gentleness of speech and ease of courtesy for all his rudeness of appearance, stood on the station platform with her, holding her hand for all the world as if she were but a child. Alice Royce found herself almost uneasy in the faith with which they looked upon her during the slow, mountainous drive to Ramsay and, when sitting in the low ceilinged room of the old mountain cottage, lighted only by a dim kerosene lamp and the glow and glare of a wood fire, she found herself regretful at first for having made the journey, for having by her coming instilled hope in hearts that had better, it would appear, attune themselves to resignation.

For the case of murder that the State prosecutors had made against Allen Bullen was very strong and clear; his guilt seemed indubitable. The trial that ended in his being sentenced to life imprisonment had been brief indeed.

Allen Bullen was only twenty-two years old and up to a year before when he inherited his father's small farm with its complement of sheep and hogs, his reputation had been one of wildness, though there had been nothing sinister in any of his escapades. But, following the customs of the mountaineers on certain occasions, such as market days in Crandall or sometimes when they journeyed to the fairs or "court week" at the county seat, Battletown, there had been excessive indulgences in the pale whiskey that the men of the hills manufacture in defiance of Uncle Sam's "revenuers." In the rude humor of the locality young Bullen's susceptibility to "corn liquor" had been a great joke. It was known that frequently on returns from such local celebrations he might be expected to act and talk queerly and vaguely with eyes curiously staring, like those of a somnambulist, and that in the middle sometimes of a word or a gesture he had been known to fall into a heavy—a complete swoon. Such actions and results, while by no means uncommon as forms of alcoholism, were decidedly unusual among the hardy, open-air mountaineers, the majority of whom could drink the raw, new liquor in repeated doses without qualm or visible effect.

But after his marriage to pretty Laura Mason in the springtime, Allen Bullen had gone "straight"—that is, until the day in August when with other mountain farmers he went to Crandall to dicker with the wool agents for the prices on the autumn shearing. Primarily, his happiness in his new state was his undoing for on that occasion in the Crandall tavern he had "met up" with Larry Hampton against whom he had held something approaching a feud over young Hampton's own former aspirations for the hand of Laura Mason. The youths had settled their differences in a friendly glass. Then Fred Hampton, Larry's older cousin, had joined them, expressed his pleasure at seeing them friends again and—young Bullen's resolution, which was that he would return home early and sober to his bride, died with the befuddling of his senses.

Fred Hampton had wisely shaken his head when Larry and Allen swung out of the tavern arm in arm to tramp jovially back the few miles to Ramsay. He said he would wait awhile and "take it quieter" on the way home. About fifteen minutes later he departed.

II.

The pack of hunting dogs from their kennels in the rear of old Judge Grantham's home set up a wild baying in the lonely lateness of the night and the Judge himself, flanked by Henry and Martha, his negro house servants, came down the old broad stairway answering repeated thunderings on the door, coupled with sharp, excited cries of urgency.

Their lamplight flung its rays sharply on the white face of Fred Hampton.

"Judge Grantham," he moaned, "my cousin Larry's been murdered—by Allen Bullen. Poor Larry's layin' down the road apiece—near Crow's woods—right there on the road with his heart all hacked."

"Where's Allen Bullen?"

"Right there beside him."

"A duel?"

"No—a murder—plain murder. Larry's knife and revolver are in his pockets. Bullen's a layin' there alongside of him—dead drunk—you know the way he gets. And he's got the bloody knife in his hands."

Hampton's hands went up as if to shield his eyes from the horror of what he had seen.

"Your own hands are bloody," said Judge Grantham suddenly.

"Yes," answered Hampton, as suddenly staring at them, "they got that away when I picked Larry up to see if he was dead."

Old Harry, the negro, was sent to spread the alarm, and soon armed with lanterns and headed by the dignified old Judge the party made their way to Crow's Woods.

It was quite as Hampton had told it. The youth Larry was dead; there were five stab wounds in his left breast, all of which had penetrated the heart. Not even the clustered lights of the lanterns flashing fully on the face of young Bullen aroused him. It was seen that he was not injured. His right arm was outflung along the ground, and held half listlessly in his hand was a long-bladed, horn-handled clasp knife, such as are commonly to be found in the pockets of mountaineers. During the useless efforts made to revive him, cause him to face his victim and secure some statement concerning the ghastly deed, some one in the horrified group recalled the old rivalry in the courtship that there had been between the young men.

"And he pretended," said Fred Hampton bitterly, "that all that was past and Larry and him was going to be good friends again like when they were just boys."

As Fred Hampton had already stated there was no weapon in Larry's dead hand. His knife was in his trousers' pocket; his revolver on his hip, not a cartridge discharged. The youth's body was decently covered with an overcoat loaned for the purpose and carried to his home.

Bullen had also to be carried, but it was roughly he was borne to Judge Grantham's home. There, a doctor called from Crandall's succeeded in reviving him. When told of the charge against him, the youth was so shaken with horror that his talk was incoherent, but pieced together the statement finally stood that on their way home young Hampton had become so drowsy and uncertain of his steps that he had finally flung himself on the roadside and declared he meant to have a sleep there and then. Young Bullen declared he had done his best to persuade his companion to continue the journey, but in the friendliest manner, and then suddenly he stated that he himself must have become unconscious. He could remember nothing further until awakening in the Judge's house.

And this, when the trial was held, proved all he had to tell the jury to offset the damning fact of his being found beside the dead man in the road with the bloody knife in his hand—all he had to say for himself save one thing. He swore that the knife found in his hand had not belonged to him. But the evidence was that he was searched on the night of his arrest and no other knife was in his possession. James MacNaughton, keeper of the general store at Ramsay, swore he had sold Bullen such a knife as was exhibited in court.

"But that is not my knife, I swear," the prisoner had cried; "my knife had a nick off one end of the horn handle and it had a broken blade."

"You mean," said the Prosecutor scornfully, "it had a nick in the edge of the big blade—that nick is there as you see, gentlemen of the jury."

"No—no," the prisoner retorted. "It was the little blade—the short blade—the end was broken right off."

But as a man's clasp knife is very much of a private possession, the only witness in substantiation of himself that young Bullen could bring as to the marks on his knife was his young wife, to whom the stern faced jury of farmers listened kindly but incredulously. In fact, it took them only fifteen minutes to bring in their verdict, dealing a second degree verdict largely on the pretty child wife's account and because of the evidence of young Bullen's peculiar condition that had permitted him to drop in a stupor beside his victim. The defense had tried to make a point of this—had demanded whether it were possible for a man to murder another without becoming so sobered as to flee the scene of the crime. But the Prosecutor had replied with many citations from cases to show that murderers had frequently been overcome by sudden torpor and drowsiness immediately after the commission of their crimes. Besides, they produced witnesses to prove that, when intoxicated, complete unconsciousness had been known to overcome young Bullen in the midst of the wildest pranks.

And these were the facts that Alice Royce heard from the lips of the youth's pitiable child wife, interspersed with tearful pleadings for assistance in proving her husband innocent.

III.

The activities of Alice Royce in the week following brought revelations astonishing to herself and were destined to end in a thrilling, intense and tragic scene. There were two days spent at the scene of the murder, despite that months had passed since the night Larry Hampton had lain there with his life ended by five fiercely directed stab wounds. There was a third day when she returned to the scene accompanied by the Assistant State Prosecutor from Battletown; a day in which she had talked to many citizens in Ramsay and in Crandall; then she had disappeared from the vicinity, but on the eighth day when she returned to Ramsay, the State Prosecutor, a handsome, gray haired man of a fine dignity of demeanor and his younger assistant accompanied her. They went directly to the home of old Judge Grantham. Half an hour later an astounded, aged official sent old Henry for Deputy Sheriff Briggs. And when that official entered Judge Grantham's big office parlor the population of Ramsay followed after, for in those localities the rule of public court is strictly upheld.

"Judge Grantham," said the Prosecutor slowly, "it would appear that but for the brilliant reasoning and patient effort of this gifted young lady," here he paid Miss Royce a most courtly bow, "this State might have continued an enormous injustice to an innocent young man. I refer, sir, to Allen Bullen of Ramsay, now under a life sentence for the murder of Lawrence Hampton.

"The real criminal, Your Honor, I now firmly believe is in this very room." He paused, and then turning to the prisoner said deliberately, solemnly, "Fred Hampton, I charge you now with the murder of your Cousin Lawrence."

Hampton, his small, blue eyes lighting fiercely, shouted:

"Why—what kind of talk is that? Everybody knows who killed my Cousin Lawrence?"

"Everybody thought they knew," said the Prosecutor coldly, "until this young detective brought the real facts to light. Your Honor, I will state what these facts are, and then the prisoner can insist upon a hearing or waive it—as he sees fit.

"Greed, Your Honor, not revenge or angry passion, was the cause of this crime as I will shortly prove.

"But first let us take up the circumstance of the knife—or rather knives!" The lawyer's voice rose on the last word and he held up to view two horn-handled clasp knives exactly similar until he had opened the blades. Then it was observed that there was a nick in the long blade of one knife rusted with its crimson life statin; that the short blade of the other knife was broken off almost at the middle.

"Miss Royce reasoned," continued the Prosecutor, "on this proposition: What if Allen Bullen's story were true; what if the knife he held in his hand were not his own? Then you have the picture of these two young men, victims of their foolish excesses lying in a stupor on the road. Upon them comes one who conceives a deadly purpose against Lawrence Hampton. How easy to murder Lawrence and cast the shadow of guilt on his unconscious companion! Had Frederick Hampton possessed a sufficiently cool nerve to abstract from the pocket of the slumbering Bullen that young man's own knife, murder Lawrence with it and then put the blood-stained weapon in Bullen's helpless hand; that poor youth would have paid most dearly for his night's debauch. The real murderer would never have been found out.

"But Frederick Hampton struck first; murdered first, thinking only to commit the crime and flee. But there came the after thought—the placing of his knife in Bullen's hand. There were no initials on it—it was the same sort of horn-handled knife that a dozen men in this room could produce—save only for the nick in the blade. If, however, Bullen's guilt was to be successfully established, he must rob the man of his own knife. And this knife must be done away with—hidden from sight. As it was he who must give the alarm of murder, it would not be wise for him to keep this knife of Bullen's in his possession for an instant. It was dark. He could not know but there was some brightly distinguishing mark upon it. Did he fling it away—as far in the woods as he could? Or did he hide it somewhere near the scene of the crime before giving the alarm? He hid it, Your Honor.

"Two days of patient search by Miss Royce revealed a spot twenty feet off the road where the earth had been disturbed and then pressed down by a human foot. In this tangle of shrubbery no other human feet had passed, and in the hardening and freezing of the clay of this Tennessee soil the footprint remained perfectly outlined. The measurements were taken. Miss Royce before breaking this ground called on my office and my assistant accompanied her to this spot. Under that footprint, Your Honor, was found this knife with a broken short blade and a nick off the corner of the handle—such a knife as Allen Bullen swore was his!

"Next, Your Honor, Andrew Renfrew, who is here, will swear to the occasion when he saw Frederick Hampton while in the act of mending some old harness nick the long blade of his knife. Hampton was annoyed at the time, told Renfrew what he had done and showed the nicked blade. Then, Your Honor, thanks to Miss Royce's investigations, we will prove by Roger Agnew, the postmaster, that six days after the murder Hampton received a package from a mail order cutlery concern in Cincinnati. Inquiry of that firm revealed that his purchase was that of a new clasp knife.

"As to the measurements of the footprint over the place where the knife was found, my assistant and Miss Royce took measurements of footprints that they actually saw Hampton make.



"Two days of patient search by Miss Royce revealed a spot twenty feet off the road where the earth had been disturbed and then pressed down by a human foot."

"They prove him to have been the man who buried Allen Bullen's knife.

"I said, Your Honor, that greed was the motive. I might add chagrin, too. Miss Royce's investigations of Hampton's affairs reveal the existence of an uncle in Virginia—a man of wealth. Three months ago this old gentleman's son was killed by a fall from a horse. This left Frederick and Lawrence Hampton as the only heirs. Although Frederick was the elder, the old gentleman had openly stated among acquaintances that Lawrence was his favorite, and that he had drawn up a will to that effect since his son's death. But if Lawrence was dead—this man here would be the natural heir-at-law.

"And this is the man who swore before his God, you remember, that he was the only witness to come upon the murder of Lawrence Hampton. He was indeed the only witness of that crime, for poor young Allen Bullen lay there unwittingly with his limp hand ready to receive the accusing knife."

The lawyer halted and turned to look fully at Hampton.

"Have you anything to say?" he demanded. "If so—arise."

But Hampton remained crumpled in his chair, passing a long hand over a livid face. Finally he spoke.

"Murder," he said, "murder will out!"

THE HYDROAEROPLANE AN AID IN SEADISASTERS

By Roy L. McCardell.

"MAN the hydroaeroplane!"

That will be the cry along our coasts when shipwrecked vessels are pounding on the reefs.

A simple yet nearly tragic incident at Sea Cliff, Long Island, recently, demonstrated most emphatically the practicability of an airship with pontoons—a hydroaeroplane—as a life-saving appartus.

Walter Strohbach, aged twenty-three, a chauffeur of Flatbush, has the distinction of being the first person rescued from a watery grave by means of a hydroaeroplane. The greater distinction of being the first hydroaeroplane operator to save a drowning man comes to Charles Wald, aged thirty, enthusiastic aviator.

Strohbach was upset from a rowboat during bad weather in Hempstead Harbor and Wald, a mile away, conducting experiments in a thirty-five mile an hour gale, swooped down in his hydroaeroplane upon the exhausted and sinking man and saved him.

Since this, repeated demonstrations prove conclusively that the hydroaeroplane not alone can be used to rescue men overboard, but is available also to save imperilled persons from doomed ships on lee shores in wildest weather.

The matter of the efficacy of hydroaeroplanes as coast guard life saving appliances has been brought to the attention of the United Sates Governmen and the Volunteer Life Saving Service, and efforts are being made to put hydroaeroplanes into practical life saving service along with the lifeboat, the life line and mortar and the breeches buoy.

Let Wald, the aviator, tell the story, for I went out to his hangar at Sea Cliff and discussed the matter with him.

"Strohbach?" he said in response to my first question. "Well, he was a chauffeur holidaying out here, and he went out into the bay in a rowboat in a rising gale and got capsized.

"I was just shoving my machine out of the hangar," said Wald, taking me to the waterside and pointing out over the Sound, "and had taken the water when I heard the cries of people along shore who had seen the accident—these and the drumming of feet down the plank causeway told me something out of the ordinary was taking place out on the water.

"A glance down the cove and out upon the rougher water of the bay showed me an overturned rowboat with a man clinging to it, while a hundred yards away and being carried further out by the strong ebb tide I saw, bobbing up between the whitecaps, the head and splashing arms of a man who was giving every evidence by the awkward energy of his actions that he was an inexperienced swimmer.

"I threw the motor over and the propellers began to hum. Another half minute and the machine was moving, gaining speed every turn. The pontoons hit the whitecaps at the mouth of the cove and the old water bird skipped like a hard flung flat stone from wave to wave. She looks like she is bumping the bumps when she does that, but she rides like a feather bed in twice the gale this was."

Wald was living the scene again and his eyes brightened as he turned and indicated just where the water flier took the waves.

"When I first sighted the overturned boat," he went on, "it was about two miles away. The spray from where the pontoon bows struck the water stung my face and showered over the planes, but with a hop, skip and a jump and riding like a rocking chair, the old flier hit the high spots on the bay, and before you could have counted a hundred was within fifty feet of the struggling Strohbach, now almost all in and going under.

"I could see his friend, who was still clinging to the capsized rowboat, was in no danger, and that motor boats were being started up along shore to get to him, so I kept my eye on the weakening man in the water and shouted to him to hold up.

"Then I shut off the motor and turned the rudder so that we scraped the right pontoon within eight inches of him. As soon as I had stopped the engine I stepped down on the frame that holds the aeroplane to the pontoons and, as we went past the man in the water, I reached down and got him. He grabbed my hand and held on like the proverbial drowning man, and the impetus of the moving machine carried us still into the wind for about fifteen feet, when the drag anchor of his bulk in the water stopped our headway and the thirty-five mile wind we were going into began to blow us back.

"I let the man get his breath and strength as we drifted back, and then, bringing him around between the pontoons, helped him up into the passenger seat. He was weak and full of water and he wasn't quite aware of what had happened to him until I got the engine started again and brought him back to the hangar."

Wald led me back to the hangar and we went inside and looked at the winged thing.

"It was an important day for Mr. Strohbach of Flatbush," resumed the little aviator as he patted a water warped plane, "but it was of equal importance to the thousands the hydroaeroplane is going to save from drowning from this on. I could have picked up ten Strohbachs and brought them safely to land, and I could have picked them all up, one after another, and saved all ten at the same time."

I then questioned him about the real rescue work by hydroaeroplane at sea.

"The hydroaeroplane will not only pick up the man overboard, as I picked up Strohbach," he replied, "but it can operate in a gale and go out to sea in the teeth of a storm and take a line out to a wreck. Not only that, but it could come along the lee side of the wreck and pick up men, women and children who might be lowered over the side.

"When a ship goes ashore in a storm a few years from now," he said enthusiastically, "the cry will not be 'Man the lifeboat!' It will be 'Man the hydroaeroplane!'—maybe the coast guards will just shorten the word to 'plane.'

"Big ocean steamers could easily carry several hydroaeroplanes," he said, coming back to his quieter manner. "The experiment of flying from and landing on a ship at sea has been repeatedly made. An aeroplane on the ill-fated Titanic would have scouted out and brought rescuing ships out of the ice field."

"But suppose it is a real storm, a tempest?" I asked.

"It must not be thought that an aeroplane and a hydroaeroplane cannot be flown into a gale," he answered readily. "The storm that might dash a land-flying machine against trees or buildngs would have no effect on a hydroaeroplane with sufficient water surface to manoeuvre on.

"As matters are now, the work of our coast guards is hampered during a shipwreck off shore by the limited efficiency of the lifeboat and the breeches buoy," said Wald as we walked down the launching rails. "As an auxiliary life saving apparatus a hydroaeroplane would be the means of saving thousands of lives. With a surf too high to launch a lifeboat, with the reef on which the ship is wrecked too far out to fire a lifeline to, the helpless life guardsmen have stood and watched scores of ships batter to pieces while they have been helpless to save."

I asked him how long he thought it would be before the hydroaeroplane would be part of the United States life saving equipment.

"In five years," he answered quickly, "and it should be in one. Every life saving station along our coast will be equipped with a hydroaeroplane in that time and every great ocean steamer will be compelled to carry a hydroaeroplane as it is now compelled to equip with wireless."

Young Mr. Wald, hydroaeroplane life saver, knows something of the sea and ships. He was seven years in the United States Customs Service, three of these in the Philippines. He is a graduate in mechanical engneering of the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn.

At present, he told me, he is taking a thorough course in astronomy and navigation, as he fully expects to be the commander of a passenger-carrying-life-saving-at-sea transatlantic airship by the time he is forty.